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A New Library Career



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ABSTRACT

After working as a public and school library director for two decades, the challenge of reference and research work in an academic library is exciting and daunting for a mid-career librarian. She quickly realizes that constantly comparing fondly remembered library experiences with new professional challenges must transition into embracing what lays ahead and learning new skills. To successfully serve an academic library patron population, the variety of knowledge and information expertise is different and expanded, but the time-honored aptitude of treating library visitors well and carefully ascertaining their information needs remains the same.

Introduction

Driving across Mountain Creek Lake toward Dallas Baptist University, the campus shimmers ahead atop the foothills of Southwest Dallas, just 12 miles from downtown. The school's colonial-style buildings replicate famous American historical structures. Spread over 292 acres, the campus is lushly landscaped with trees and flowers. As a new academic librarian, this was a bigger library world than I had known. After earning my doctorate in education from DBU at age 55, I was hired as an Assistant Professor of Library Science. I was one year away from qualifying for my full pension in the Texas public education system, where I had worked for more than two decades as director of a high school library that also served as the community's only public library.

My new job at DBU includes teaching research classes, and serving as a general reference and doctoral research librarian. Talk about a steep learning curve! I was so nervous my first few weeks at the reference desk, I developed sciatica nerve pain. I was thrilled with my new professional role, but could not relax during the workday, wanting so badly to already know how to help in reference areas for which I had no experience. I kept reminding myself of Fontenot's (2008) suggestion that "learning challenges can bring new energy to a mid-career librarian, if they are willing to make a career change" (p. 26).

Transition

About three weeks into the job, I turned a corner. I was discouraged from trying to learn my new position quickly and not being able to relax at work. Physical exercise has always relieved my anxiety, but the sciatica prevented my usual active lifestyle. So, I made a decision to accept that this academic setting was different from

my previous job in a bustling community library that served high school students, teachers, senior adults, and families with preschoolers. I recognized that working at the university level is more challenging and reminded myself that I am treated with unfailing courtesy by students and faculty. I missed story time and visiting with high school kids throughout the day. Bible commentaries are not as entertaining as Bluebonnet books and graphic novels. Yet, I wanted to work at DBU, the world of motivated college students and caring professors fascinated me and I was determined to understand and contribute to it (Greenwood, 2015).

As is true in all levels of education, students provide useful guidance for how to be an effective librarian. Levitov (2010) succinctly explained “my students provided the clues to my new job” (p.48). I could apply this truth to school, public, and academic library work. I reminded myself to pay attention to what the library patrons needed. During one of my four interviews for this job, the library director tried to reassure me of my capability to transition from a high school to college library. “The DNA of most libraries,” he said, “is similar.” He is a nice, patient man.

In my previous position, our public library service population, determined by the state of Texas, was 33,000. The library also served 1,900 students and faculty. With two full-time library assistants and three part-time evening and weekend staff, we were serving more than one population in a single facility, consistently challenged to meet high school literacy needs and provide innovative public library programming. Would the skills I learned in public and school librarianship transfer well into the academic setting?

In the university library I have a specialized role and am tasked with reference, instruction and research. Unlike the community library setting, where everyone on a small staff performs a variety of jobs, I am learning to “stay in my lane,” and focus on my assigned areas. Yet, the liberal arts university environment is a bigger library world. I am thankful for the opportunity to learn every day. I am exposed to a variety and depth of knowledge in many subject areas. I was nervous about fielding actual reference questions, stomachache nervous.

As a new reference librarian in a private Christian university, I had no idea there were so many Bible commentaries, dictionaries, and atlases. Bible study materials were organized in the order of the books of the Bible, yet also available on another shelf, they were organized in volume sets. Very tall shelves of faded LOC call number spine labels. During the first days at my new job, I did not feel busy with work, but felt tremendous inner pressure to learn this new system. I wanted to escape from the reference desk back to the circulation desk, where I knew how to help people. And yet, even the circulation policies at the academic level are more detailed than my previous experience at the school library.

I grew to appreciate the DBU library staff and now consider them as friends. We pray together each morning, sharing challenges, hopes, and daily pray for our student workers. At first, I felt restricted by the subdued atmosphere of college students quietly studying throughout the library. Now, I view the university library as a place of academic discovery, and a place to love and serve others. I can integrate my faith in every work-related task I do.

Learning the Work

The DBU Library Director, Scott Jeffries, provides specific reasons he hired me for reference and research services, despite my lack of academic library experience. “Hiring at DBU is largely about fit and whether the candidate has a sense of the vision and mission of the university,” he said. “Our librarians need to understand the unique personality of a school like DBU and be a good addition to this environment. Reference work takes expertise, but also a keen sense of customer service and care.”

I now embrace the slower pace, less hectic workload, and focus on building connections with professors, students, and the library staff. I make phone calls and send emails to full-time and adjunct instructors to offer classroom research instruction. I contact each doctoral cohort to offer individualized research help. Weekly college research classes allow me to instruct new students at DBU about research skills and library resources. On our library staff of ten adult workers, there have been five family deaths and several serious personal illnesses within the last year. It is quite unusual; I have never worked with a small group of people that have faced so many common health and family challenges in such a short amount of time. I believe these difficulties make our daily prayer times more meaningful and truly give our library “team” a sense of reciprocal caring and support.

The most valuable lesson I have learned from this career change is the library skill that matters most is how you treat people. Love each person you serve in the library - especially students, but also every faculty and staff member. Do not allow the circumstances of the work day, your personal life, or the sometimes sporadic cooperation of technology devices dictate how you treat library patrons. “As the concept of lifelong career rather than lifelong employment has emerged and the value of the working life has grown, organizations often encourage employees to ‘engage in lifelong learning,’ and librarians are no exception to this challenge to develop their careers” (Noh, 2011, p.213). I am fortunate that DBU offered me an opportunity to experience a new library career.

Embrace a Library Career Change:

- Stop comparing the new job with your previous one.
- Recognize the commonality in all libraries' DNA, but embrace the differences if your new library job serves a different type of population.
- Do not put undue pressure on yourself to learn new skills quickly, but listen to what your patrons ask for to meet their information needs.
- In any library or job, the most important skill is how you treat people. †

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